

In New Congress, Schakowsky Gets Intelligence Seat

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As the U.S. House gets set to debate President Bush's call to deploy more than 20,000 new troops to Iraq, Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky is getting a chance to see some of the nation's most closely-guarded national-security secrets.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi appointed Schakowsky, who represents Evanston, to the House Intelligence Committee last month following the Democrats' sweep of Congress.

"It wasn't something I immediately said yes to," Schakowsky said. "My worry is about constraints that I have from being as outspoken as I am."

As a member of the committee, Schakowsky is privy to top-secret information about national intelligence agencies.

"I have to find a balance between honoring the classified information I will now have access to and not being constrained," Schakowsky said.

The congresswoman said she wants to use her new position to bring oversight to intelligence community programs such as the National Security Agency's wiretapping program.

"We want to use the tools that are available (to gather intelligence)," Schakowsky said. "(But) you can't just give a blank check to an administration. We've had surveillance against people that demonstrate against the war."

The 20-member committee was commissioned in 1977 for this purpose, said Jay Parker, visiting associate professor of government at Georgetown University.

Members were very aggressive after the committee's formation, Parker said.

"There have been a lot of concerns over the past six years that there has been a lack of oversight," he said.

One of the reasons for this hesitation is congressional fear of blocking safety measures in the war on terror, Parker said.

With today's intelligence community, a change in attitude may be difficult.

"Whoever's moving onto that committee certainly has their work cut out for them," Parker said.

The reorganized intelligence community can make it difficult to focus on the most relevant issues, Parker said. Representatives have been known to politicize committee actions before an election year.

Committee Chairman Silvestre Reyes (D-Texas) apparently is hoping for change as well.

"Congresswoman Schakowsky's distinguished record in the House identified her as a member who will bring a fresh perspective and an invigorated approach to oversight of the intelligence community," Reyes said through his press secretary.

On Tuesday, Schakowsky introduced legislation calling for the Defense Department to report on private contractors who work - and sometimes fight - in combat zones.

At places such as the Guantanamo Bay detention center, these contractors were found to be giving orders to enlisted military, Schakowsky said.

Schakowsky also is spending her time examining the war in Iraq. Schakowsky said she supports a rapid redeployment of troops rather than a gradual de-escalation.

"As you pull out, the ones that are left are in even greater danger," Schakowsky said.